



# Guidance for Strong Permanency Practice



## Engaging Families

### Key Messages

- Every interaction with a family is an intervention with impact.
- Successful early engagement sets the stage for productive case planning, visitation, referrals...in short, for everything the agency and family will do together.
- Engaging families can be challenging. There are many boxes to check, and families may be angry, scared or “carrying baggage” from past experiences.
- Engagement challenges can be overcome with thoughtful and deliberate practice.

### Questions to Ask

#### 1. Do your core beliefs support engagement?

Underneath successful engagement with a family are these core beliefs:

- Every human being has value and can change.
- Every family has strengths and the potential to keep children safe and well.
- Although it may look different, all parents love their children.
- Approaching parents who have harmed their children with respect isn't condoning their actions.

#### 2. Is there empathy?

Engagement requires empathy. And yet, the serious challenges in child welfare can overwhelm our empathy. We may engage in power struggles with parents. We may put our personal values on their lives. If this is happening, it's time to talk about it with your supervisor and develop strategies to bring empathy back into the relationship: to listen, recognize that the system isn't fair, and acknowledge a family's experience.



### 3. Is trauma part of the conversation?

Many family members working with CFSA have had past traumas that affect their judgment, parenting, or how they react to a social worker's interventions. Are we recognizing that something with deep emotional roots is happening and that a conversation may trigger strong reactions?

### 4. Are we rolling with resistance?

It's understandable to see resistance as negative and part of a family's problems. But resistance is a completely natural response for anyone facing a huge loss. Rolling with resistance means making room for the family's perspective, offering options not ultimatums, and figuring out how to meet half way.

### 5. Are we avoiding common engagement pitfalls?

Engagement is *not* the development of a friendship or "identifying" with someone. It's *not* setting aside consequences in order to build rapport. It's *not* working from an interview questionnaire. It's *not* serving as a helpful expert. Engagement is building collaborative working relationships that are characterized by trust and mutual respect.

## Helpful Resources

Click here for...

- ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) Information [here](#) and video refresher [here](#)
- CFSA parent guides on investigations ([English](#) and [Spanish](#)) and family assessments ([English](#) and [Spanish](#))
- [Community Resources List](#)
- [Empathy Video Refresher](#)
- [Information and Resource Guide for Birth Parents Following the Removal of a Child \(English and Spanish\)](#)
- [Peer Unit One-Pager](#)
- [Practice Refresher: Focusing on Kin](#)
- [Practice Tips on Engaging with Birth Families](#)
- [Practice Tips on Managing Hostility](#)
- [Practice Tips on Working with Families During Incarceration](#)
- [Practice Tips on Effective Sibling Visits \(coming soon!\)](#)
- [Tip Sheet on TAL \(coming soon!\)](#)

Webinars: [engaging with birth parents](#) and [working with parents who have substance abuse issues](#) and [Fatherhood Engagement](#) and [Engaging Incarcerated parents](#) and [Widening the Circle of Support Through family Engagement](#) and [Collaborative Family Engagement Process](#)

